Did Meno propound a paradox? According to the received accounts of Plato's *Meno*, he did. He is said to have propounded an eristic paradox about the acquisition of knowledge. But the received accounts are mistaken.

I. Consider what some representative commentators tell us about the crucial passage, 80A-81A. We are told that Meno "tries to run off on an irrelevant puzzle", and that according to this puzzle, "'inquiry' is impossible" or "seeking is impossible". We are told that Meno "expresses some doubt about the possibility of knowledge" and even that he "doubts whether any criterion of truth exists". Commentators seem to have agreed that Meno's comment is "a lazy and eristic argument", a "convenient dodge" or "eristic trick". It seems agreed also that Meno's doubt was quite general. Typically, commentators believe his comment posed

...a sophistic dilemma about knowledge. One can never find out anything new: either one knows it already, in which case there is no need to find it out, or else one does not, and in that case there is no means of recognizing it when it is found.

Each of these points in the received interpretation is incorrect. Meno's remark is not:

1) irrelevant
2) a claim that inquiry is impossible or that seeking is impossible
3) a claim
4) an expression of doubt as to the possibility of knowledge

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2 Ibid.
5) an expression of doubt concerning the existence of a criterion of truth
6) a lazy and eristic argument
7) an argument
8) a convenient dodge or eristic trick
9) general in scope.

More importantly, it is not:

10) a paradox. *

Rather than examine these errors one by one, I should like to advance an interpretation of the passage which will avoid them. The evidence cited for this interpretation will make clear why these are errors. The major points in this interpretation will be:

1) that Meno’s remark is a reasonable response to what he takes to be Socratic irony.
2) that Meno neither states, suggests nor intends any paradox.
3) that Socrates does not “restate” Meno’s remark – he slyly replaces it for his own (legitimate) purposes in the dialogue.

II. We shall consider these points in order. Let us begin with the relevant portions of the text. Early in the dialogue, Socrates professes not to know ὤν τοῦ ἐστι τὸ παράπων ἀρετή (71A). Probably Socrates professes this in all sincerity, though Meno seems incredulous at first. Meno himself volunteers to say what ἀρετή is, thinking it easy to do so. Not understanding the difficulties involved, he gives not an account of what ἀρετή is but a swarm of examples of ἀρεται. When he realizes that these are not to the point, and that he is helpless to answer Socrates’ question, he is reduced to a state of ἀπορία. He says οὐκ ἔχω ὅτι ἀποκρίνομαι σοι (80B), “I am at a loss what answer to give you”. He adds, νῦν δὲ οὐδὲ τι ἐστι τὸ παράπων ἔχω εἶπεῖν, “But now I am not able to say what (virtue) is at all”.

This contrasts in a subtle way with what Meno has just said, namely that he has on countless occasions in the past made speeches περὶ ἀρετῆς. On this point Taylor says,

In any other company Meno would have plenty to say about “goodness”, but in the presence of Socrates he is “paralyzed”.


10 Taylor, p. 135.